

Silverman Building
(Penn Central Building; Black and Yon Building)
1200-04 11th Avenue
Intown Neighborhood
Altoona
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5504

HABS
PA,
7-ALTO,
113-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SILVERMAN BUILDING
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PA
7-ALTO.
113-

Location: 1200-04 11th Ave. (northwest corner of 11th Avenue and 12th Street), Altoona, Blair County, Pa.

Present Owner: Andrew G. Shank, c/o Miles and Stockbridge, Attorneys-at-Law, 10 Light St., 8th floor, Baltimore, Md., 21202.

Present Use: Suites of business and professional offices occupy all six floors.

Significance: The Silverman Building is the most elaborate office building on 11th Avenue. Dating to 1924-25, the steel-framed structure is faced with white glazed terra cotta in a Neoclassical design. The building, constructed for local real estate entrepreneurs Jacob and Isaac Silverman, was erected on a site that had been owned and occupied by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company since 1851. Now known as the Black and Yon Building, this is still Altoona's most prestigious business address.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1924-25. A steam shovel broke ground for the new building June 1, 1924. By the summer of 1925, the building was ready for tenants.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: In 1924, Jacob and Isaac Silverman acquired the site for their new business block from the Pennsylvania Railroad Company for \$240,000. They sold the building to Penn Central Light and Power Company on July 2, 1926, just one year after its completion. (Deed books C/371; 319/386; 349/251,261) The electric company occupied the building until 1965, when it was sold to the firm of Lindfelter-Scott. In 1969, the building was purchased by a real estate and insurance firm and renamed the Black and Yon Building. It was sold to the current owner in 1989.
4. Contractor, suppliers: C. M. Singiser (1878-1940) supervised the construction of the Silverman building. A native of Mechanicsburg, Pa., Singiser came to Altoona in 1915 to erect the Silverman's Strand Theatre at 1504 11th Ave. He went on to supervise the construction of several large public buildings in and near the downtown area, including the Aaron building in 1922 and the Jaffa Mosque on Broad Avenue, which was designed by the local architectural firm of Shollar and Hersh. (Singiser obituary, Altoona Mirror [March 18, 1940])

A local newspaper noted that the Silvermans awarded no building contract, but "local materials and local labor, as far as practicable, entered into [the building's] construction." ("Silverman Block Almost Finished." Altoona Mirror [June 8, 1925])

5. Original plans and construction: The building was designed to house a department store on the first and mezzanine floors, but was never occupied as such. There were entrances on both the 12th Street and 11th Avenue sides; the 11th Avenue entrance was originally in the third bay. The third-to-fifth floors had suites of offices. An elaborate terra cotta beltcourse between the mezzanine and second floors marks the division between commercial shops and offices. The first-floor storefronts have undergone many changes, as have most aspects of the interior.

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6. Alterations and additions: When Penn Central took over the building in 1926, the electric company installed a three-tiered, illuminated sign on the roof, facing 11th Avenue. A 1931 photograph of the building also shows an awning on the 11th Avenue side.

In 1966, First National Bank expanded into a portion of the first and mezzanine floors of the Silverman Building. An opening was cut in the party wall to connect the addition to the remainder of the bank. First National hired Altoona architect N. Grant Nicklas to design a new facade of marble aggregate and glass panels in bronze settings. The 11th Avenue entrance was moved to the second bay, where it remains. More recent changes include the closing off of the mezzanine level and the installation of drop ceilings throughout the building.

B. Historical Context:

Built on the site of the landmark Pennsylvania Railroad Company office building, the six-story structure was erected for real estate entrepreneurs Jacob and Isaac Silverman in 1924-25. The Silvermans literally made headlines when they spent the previously unheard of sum of \$240,000 for the site of their new business block. At the time, this undertaking was the most expensive real estate transaction ever recorded in the Blair County Registry of Deeds. The Silverman's real estate activities also represented a takeover by local interests of a prime commercial property that had been controlled by the PRR since 1851.¹

The Silverman's terra cotta-faced building was a wildly speculative venture, an indication of the risks that businessmen were willing to take in a decade characterized by tremendous prosperity and optimism. The building stood vacant for a year; it was never occupied by the intended department store. The Silvermans sold the structure to the Penn Central Light and Power Company in 1926. In exchange for the building and \$204,000, Penn Central conveyed to Jacob and Isaac Silverman their old corporate headquarters on Union Avenue and \$295,000.²

Penn Central was formed in 1910 from the merger of two pre-existing power companies: the Edison Electric Illuminating Company, founded in 1887, and the Citizens Electric Light, Heat, and Power Company, founded in 1902. In 1937, the company changed its name to the Pennsylvania Edison Company, and in 1946 it merged with the Pennsylvania Electric Company, eventually forming Penelec. The electric company originally occupied the first and mezzanine floors of the building. The office entrance was on 11th Avenue; retail electric supplies were sold on the 12th Avenue side.

The company left in 1965, and the building is now known as the Black and Yon Building after the real estate firm that purchased it in 1969.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

¹For more information on the Silverman Brothers' extensive real estate and construction activities, see the pages of land transactions recorded in Blair County's grantee-grantor index, 1900-1940. See also, Altoona Mirror: "Business Block on Church Site," (March 17, 1923), which describes their new building on the corner of 16th Street and Union Avenue, and "New Building to be Erected Here," (April 9, 1937), which discusses the Strand Block Inc., Building, a three-story glass and terra cotta building designed by Frederic Shollar. In addition to business blocks, the Silvermans built the Nickelodeon Theatre in 1905, Pastime in 1906, and Strand in 1915. They also constructed and operated the Logan Theatre in Altoona and the Blair in Hollidaysburg. At one time, they owned a chain of thirteen theaters in four states.

²For the provisions of their agreement, see Deed Books 349/251 and 349/261.

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1. Architectural character: The building is divided into three vertical zones, with the intermediate stories separated into vertical bands. The Neoclassical design on both the street and avenue facades is executed in white glazed terra cotta.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The six-story, rectangular building measures 120' x 60' with six bays on 12th Street and three bays on 11th Avenue.
2. Foundations: Granite.
3. Walls: White glazed terra cotta walls on the street facades. The window bulkheads and pilaster bases are of verd antique marble. Fluted Corinthian pilasters rise between the bays, from the third story to the fifth. Cornices crown the first two stories and the middle three stories; the whole is topped by an additional story. The spandrels are elaborately decorated with Neoclassical motifs. The alley facade is red brick.
4. Structural systems, framing: Steel frame with 12" and 16" brick curtain walls.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: There are four entrances. On 11th Avenue, the entrance is located in the second bay. On 12th Street, there are two stores, flanked by the entrance to the elevator lobby. Originally, the exterior entrances were embellished with "imported travertine marble"; they now have modern glass fronts and glass and aluminum doors.
 - b. Windows: The first-floor display windows were originally constructed with 240 feet of plate glass. There were also three "island windows" on 12th Street. On the upper stories, the openings are rectangular, with a three-part window in each structural bay.
6. Roof: A parapet wall obscures the flat roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:
 - a. First: Modern stores. The elevator lobby is located at the end of a transverse corridor in the fourth bay of the 12th Street side. The floor-to-ceiling height is 14'.
 - b. Mezzanine-Fifth: Typically, these floors have a single-loaded, irregularly shaped corridor that runs longitudinally, lit on the 12th Street end by one window. The floor-to-ceiling height of the mezzanine is 10'; it is now blocked up. The second floor has a floor-to-ceiling height of 15'; and each of the upper floors have a floor-to-ceiling height of 12'.
2. Stairways: The main stairway is of steel construction with marble treads. It is located in the longitudinal corridor on each floor, and rises to the roof against the rear wall. Fire doors have recently been installed at every level.

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3. Flooring: Most of the original hardwood floors have been covered with wall-to-wall carpet or new floor tile.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Most of the walls have been covered with new materials. There are dropped ceilings in several offices and corridors.
 5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Most of the doors are modern glass or wood. Few of the office doors retain their original rectangular transoms and molded surrounds.
 - b. Windows: The first-floor display windows on the 12th Avenue side retain remnants of their original veneered Corinthian columns and wood-paneled display cases.
 6. Original mechanical systems:
 - a. Heating: Steam heat was generated by twin smokeless boilers in the basement.
 - b. Lighting: The building was equipped with electric lighting provided by transformers in a specially constructed basement compartment.
- D. Site: At the time of its construction, the Silverman Building stood in the geographical center of the business district. It was described by contemporary observers as the "100 per cent business building and the 100 per cent location . . . combined." (Altoona Mirror, [June 8, 1925]) Today, the six-story office building is so placed at the intersection of 11th Avenue and 12th Street that it has become a historic landmark in its own right.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: None.
- B. Early views:
 1. An early photograph of the Penn Central Building, showing an awning on the 11th Avenue facade and a three-tiered illuminated sign on the roof, appears in the Report of the Penn Central Light and Power Co. for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1930. (Altoona: Penn Central Co. 1931), 22. Altoona Mirror library collection.
- C. Interviews:

Clyde Yon, former owner and longtime occupant of the Silverman building, interview by Nancy Spiegel, Altoona, Pa., July 21, 1989.

Joseph S. and Louis P. Silverman, sons of Isaac Silverman, telephone interviews by Nancy Spiegel, August 17-18, 1989.
- D. Bibliography:
 1. Primary sources:

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a. Altoona Mirror:

"Business Block on Church Site," (March 17, 1923).

"Deal Closed on Silverman Block," (July 1, 1926).

"New Building to be Erected Here," (April 9, 1937).

"Penn Central to Get New Building," (June 1, 1926).

"Silverman Block Almost Finished," (June 8, 1925).

Silverman, Isaac. Obituary. (March 29, 1972).

Silverman, Jacob. Obituaries. (December 3 and 5, 1962).

Singiser, Charles M. Obituary. (March 18, 1940).

"Strand Theatre Seven Years Old," (May 26, 1923), includes biographical information on the Silverman Brothers.

- b. The Altoona Mirror library also has nine large envelopes of material relating to the Penn Central and Penelec Companies, including brochures, press releases, clippings, and several illustrated annual reports from the 1920s and 1930s. Among the most useful clippings is "Penn Central is Giant Utility," 28 April 1925, which provides a detailed history of the company.

Building Record. Tax Assessment Office, Blair County Courthouse, Hollidaysburg, Pa.

Deed books. Blair County Courthouse, Hollidaysburg, Pa.

2. Secondary sources:

Wolf, George A, ed. Blair County's First Hundred Years: 1846-1946. Altoona: The Mirror Press, 1945.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach.